

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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Put end to police in NLR schools? (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

At a time when some Arkansas schools are arming staff members for added security, a North Little Rock alderman wants the city to explore stopping the \$400,000 it pays to place resource officers in six North Little Rock schools.

The resolution filed Tuesday from Alderman Linda Robinson asks for the city to assess the annual costs of the school resource-officer program and to begin negotiations with the North Little Rock School District for reimbursement of at least a part of that cost. A report would be due June 24.

The resolution says that if discussions with the school district are “unproductive,” the council would consider recommendations on whether to continue the city’s funding.

The resolution will go before the North Little Rock City Council on Monday.

Resource officers in district are officers with the Police Department who are authorized to carry weapons on school grounds and make arrests.

Mayor Joe Smith said he doesn’t support reducing the city’s commitment to provide the officers.

“I certainly don’t mind getting the information she needs,” Smith said, referring to Robinson. “I’m not for it. Right now my opinion is that the resource-officer program is working. I’m not in favor of changing it at this point and time.”

Robinson didn’t return five phone calls by deadline Tuesday.

It costs the city an average of \$68,953 - \$413,718 annually - for each of six school resource officers at six district schools, said Danny Bradley, Smith’s chief of staff and the city’s former police chief. The cost includes uniforms, holiday pay, health insurance and other benefits, but not equipment, Bradley said. In the past, the city has funded as many as eight resource officers.

“The officers assigned vary in tenure and pay,” Bradley said about figuring the average cost per officer that the city pays.

In the wake of the December school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., that killed 20 children and six adult staff members, several Arkansas schools that can’t afford to add the resource officers are instead hiring private security firms or arming selected staff members for added security.

Neighboring Little Rock splits the cost with the LittleRock School District for 16 officers at the high schools and three of the middle schools.

If the North Little Rock district wanted to chip in for the cost of school resource officers, Smith said, he would rather expand the program than cut back on the city's funding.

"I don't want to take any chance whatsoever of losing school resource officers in our school district," Smith said. "I want our kids to be safe and for our parents to feel comfortable that their children are safe in our schools."

Having police officers in schools is "extremely important," said Scott Teague, president of the North Little Rock School Board.

"It would be an added expense, certainly," Teague said if the district had to pick up any of the cost of the program. "I know the mayor is supportive of the school district. I'm sure it will all work out."

Smith's first announced action after he was sworn in Jan. 1 was to end the city's court battle with the school district over the city's planned merger in late 2008 of three tax increment financing districts downtown. The plan led to a lawsuit in 2009 by the school district that was still pending when Smith took office. The School Board voted to drop the lawsuit after the City Council approved Jan. 14 to rescind the 2008 merger plan.

Tax increment districts divert property-tax revenue resulting from increases in property value and use the money to pay for improvements to the tax district's properties. School districts often object to tax increment financing districts because schools are the main benefactor of property-tax increases.

Smackover board hires school chief (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

SMACKOVER - The Smackover School Board approved the hiring of Dave Wilcox as the district's superintendent during a special board meeting Monday night.

Wilcox's three-year contract begins July 1, School Board President Joe Bates said. The board agreed to pay Wilcox an annual salary of \$100,000 and to reimburse him for moving expenses. Per his contract, he'll be required to establish a permanent residence in the district.

Wilcox is currently the director of support services for the Liberty-Eylau Independent School District in Texarkana, Texas. He oversees food service, maintenance, campus police and transportation, according to the district's website.

Wilcox will replace Superintendent Don Smeltzer, who plans to retire June 28. Smeltzer has been superintendent since 2008 and has been a teacher and administrator in the district for 47 years.

The board spent three nights last week interviewing Wilcox and fellow finalists Teresa Ragsdale, the Hartford School District superintendent, and William Tietz, the facilities director for the Watson Chapel School District.

Bates declined to comment on the interview process or other factors pertaining to the board's decision to hire Wilcox, saying only that the "board is really excited to have Mr. Wilcox come on board."

The board approved a \$7,500 payment in February to executive search firm McPherson and Jacobson, according to the minutes of an earlier board meeting. The Omaha, Neb.-based company conducted a nationwide search to fill the superintendent position.

Tax-cut bills quickly clear House votes (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

The state House of Representatives on Tuesday handily approved bills cutting the state's top income-tax rate, taxes on capital gains and the sales tax charged on energy used by manufacturers, after an appropriation measure to allow the use of federal dollars to purchase health insurance for 250,000 low-income Arkansans cleared the chamber.

The House also voted for legislation to cut the state's sales tax on groceries if certain conditions are met. The House voted to increase the minimum amount of state funding for school districts to provide an adequate public education. It also voted to refer a ballot measure to voters in 2014 which would help legislators gain the power to veto state agency rules and regulations.

On the 93rd day of the 2013 session, lawmakers also voted on judges' pay raises and camera systems that allow law-enforcement agencies to catch people who disobey stoplights.

TAX CUTS

The House brought up and voted on a number of tax bills in quick succession.

Rep. Charlie Collins, R-Fayetteville, said the first of the measures, House Bill 1585, would improve the business climate in the state.

The bill would cut the state's 7 percent income-tax rate to 6.875 percent on taxable income of \$44,000 and above. That rate is currently applied to taxable income of \$34,000 and above. It also would expand the 6 percent income-tax bracket from the existing range of \$20,400 and \$33,999 to apply to incomes of \$20,400 to \$43,999.

The bill would reduce state revenue by \$28.6 million in fiscal 2014 and \$57.2 million in fiscal 2015, according the Department of Finance and Administration.

House Bill 1585 passed 74-10.

The House also approved HB1966 by House Speaker Davy Carter, R-Cabot, to create more exemptions for net capital gains on as-sets acquired before Jan. 1, 2014, including a 70 percent exemption for gains

beyond \$5 million and less than \$10 million and a 100 percent exemption for gains of \$10 million or more. The bill also increases the existing \$2,000 standard income-tax deduction to \$2,200 in tax year 2015 and \$2,400 in 2016 and beyond.

The Senate later voted to change Carter's bill by trimming the capital-gains tax cuts and referred it to the Senate Revenue and Taxation Committee.

The House voted 96-0 in favor of HB1218, by Rep. Lane Jean, R-Magnolia, to reduce the sales tax on natural gas and electricity used by manufacturers from 2.75 percent to 1.625 percent, effective July 1, and to 0.625 percent effective July 1, 2014.

HB1218 would reduce state tax revenue by \$13.3 million in fiscal 2014 and \$25.6 million in fiscal 2015, the finance department said.

House Bill 1234, by Rep. Darrin Williams, D-Little Rock, passed the House 90-2. It would lower the grocery sales tax from 1.5 percent to 0.125 percent if the state pays off bond obligations that won't end for years or resolves a decades-old desegregation lawsuit.

Senate Revenue and Taxation Committee Chairman Jake Files, R-Fort Smith, said later that the Senate tax committee is considering "a limited number of tax cuts" taking effect in fiscal 2014, with the majority of the tax cuts taking effect in fiscal 2015. He said he expects to know today what tax cuts will be in the committee's taxcut package and how much it will cost.

BIG RIVER STEEL

The House voted 81-9 in favor of an appropriation measure to make payments on bonds issued for the Big River Steel mill near Osceola; the measure required 75 votes to pass.

Rep. Duncan Baird, R-Lowell, said Senate Bill 430 included the appropriation for the Economic Development Commission's projects, including up to \$20 million in bond payments for the steel mill. The Senate approved the appropriation Feb. 28 in a 34-0 vote.

Passage of HB1870, sponsored by Rep. Monte Hodges, D-Blytheville, and the Senate version of the bill April 8 authorizes the commission to issue \$125 million in general obligation bonds for the mill and allows the state to enter into a binding agreement with Big River Steel.

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

The House approved 88-0 Senate Joint Resolution 7, by Sen. Jonathan Dismang, R-Searcy, to refer to voters a proposed constitutional amendment to allow the Legislature to enact a law restricting state agencies' ability to create new rules and regulations.

Supporters want to prevent state agencies' rules from taking effect until they are reviewed and approved by the legislative committee responsible for agency oversight.

Rep. Andrea Lea, R-Russellville, said under current law, legislative committees can review agency rules, but can't prevent them from taking effect.

ADEQUACY FUNDING

The House voted 92-0 to approve House Bill 1774 by Rep. James McLean, D-Batesville, to increase the minimum state funding to provide an adequate education by 2 percent from \$6,267 per pupil to \$6,393 per pupil in fiscal 2014 and \$6,521 in fiscal 2015.

All public school districts would receive the 2 percent funding increase.

RED-LIGHT CAMERAS

A bill to enable the largest cities in the state to use red-light cameras for traffic enforcement failed to pass in the House with only 25 favorable votes.

House Bill 2158, sponsored by Rep. Eddie Armstrong, D-North Little Rock, would allow cities with at least 50,000 people to install "automated enforcement devices," which photograph license plates of motorists who run red lights. Violators would face a civil penalty of up to \$75.

Rep. Nate Bell, R-Mena, said the bill would mean allowing "robo-police" in the state, which he said would mean granting law enforcement new authority.

CHURCH IMMUNITY

The House narrowly approved a bill that would codify charitable immunity for churches and eliminate liability when a person is injured or killed by a handgun on the church's property.

House Bill 1284, sponsored by Rep. Reginald Murdock, D-Marianna, passed 52-21. The measure needed 51 votes to pass the 100-member House.

Murdock said he hopes to ensure churches are immune from lawsuits with the passage of SB71, which permits churches to allow concealed handguns on their property.

ELECTION BILLS

The House State Agencies Committee approved three election bills sponsored by Sen. Bryan King, R-Green Forest, and aimed at overhauling election investigations and the makeup of state and county election commissioner boards.

Senate Bill 719 would create a "voter integrity unit" under the secretary of state's office to investigate claims of election misconduct. The results would be presented to the state Board of Election Commissioners.

TIM TEBOW LAW

In a 34-1 vote, the Senate approved a proposal to codify regulations that govern the participation of home-school students in interscholastic activities at public schools.

House Bill 1789 by state Rep. Mark Lowery, R-Maumelle, has been dubbed the “Tim Tebow Law,” a reference to the Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback who was schooled at home but played sports at a public high school.

It would apply to homeschool students who want to participate in public-school sports and in bands, choirs and other nonathletic activities that the Arkansas Activities Association governs.

EMINENT DOMAIN

A bill requiring eminent-domain proceedings to comply with the federal Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisitions Policies Act of 1970 failed to clear the Senate by two votes. The Senate voted 16-9 in favor of SB878 by Sen. Joyce Elliott, D-Little Rock. It needed backing from 18 of Arkansas’ 35 senators to pass.

Elliott said her bill is aimed at making it more difficult for a person’s property to be taken by requiring the person to be reimbursed for actual reasonable expenses, and would apply to the Little Rock Technology Park Authority, which has been searching for a site for its technology park. The U.S. Constitution already requires that “just compensation” be given to people when the government takes their property.

JUDGES’ PAY RAISES

The Joint Budget Committee approved an amendment to Senate Bill 650 by Sen. Johnny Key, R-Mountain Home, to grant 6 percent pay raises to members of the state Supreme Court and Court of Appeals and the state’s circuit judges in fiscal 2014.

The measure would increase the pay of the state Supreme Court chief justice from \$156,864 to \$166,276 and for the other six justices from \$145,204 to \$153,916. It would boost the salary of the Court of Appeals’ chief judge from \$142,969 to \$151,547 and for the other 11 judges on the court from \$140,732 to \$149,176.

The salary of the circuit judges would increase from \$136,257 to \$144,432. The raises are backed by House and Senate leadership, Key said afterward.

State lawmakers, constitutional officers, judges and prosecutors haven’t received raises in fiscal 2011, 2012 or 2013, according to the Bureau of Legislative Research

Quiz Bowl finals set for AETN broadcast (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

The state conference finals of the Arkansas Quiz Bowl 2013, also known as the annual Governor's Academic Competition, will be broadcast Saturday by public television's AETN.

The public is invited to be part of the audience for the event, in which the top two teams from each of the seven high school classifications will compete.

The first round of matches, which will begin at 9 a.m. and go until noon, will include, in order of appearance:

1A - Alpena High vs. Haas Hall Academy (Fayetteville)

2A - Conway Christian vs. Cedar Ridge High (Newark)

7A - Arkansas School for Mathematics, Sciences and the Arts (Hot Springs) vs. Fort Smith Southside High

4A - Subiaco Academy vs. Gravette High

The second round of matches, which will start at 1:30 p.m. and go until 4 p.m., will include, in order of appearance:

5A - Watson Chapel High vs. Little Rock Christian

3A - Episcopal Collegiate (Little Rock) vs. Fountain Lake High

6A - Benton High vs. Searcy High

The event will be held at the AETN studios, 350 S. Donaghey Ave., Conway. Audience members will be seated on a first-come, first-served basis. Spectators will be admitted via the Sesame Street entrance and should arrive no later than 8:30 a.m. for the first round and 1p.m. for the second round.

The Arkansas Governor's Quiz Bowl Association holds regional tournaments across the state during March, leading up to the finals. In the preliminary tournaments and in the final competitions, Quiz Bowl team members display their knowledge by answering questions in the subjects of literature, math, science, history, art, music and economics. Teams compete for the opportunity to participate in national tournaments and for scholarship money.

AETN is broadcast on KETS (Little Rock), KEMV (Mountain View), KETG (Arkadelphia), KAFT (Fayetteville), KTEJ (Jonesboro) and KETZ (El Dorado).

LR Central official accused of harassing students (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

A local high school official is scheduled to appear in court on accusations of misdemeanor harassment.

Central High School Assistant Principal Thomas McDonald, 55, turned himself in to Little Rock police Tuesday after he was issued warrants for five counts of misdemeanor harassment on a minor.

Officers were initially informed of the sexual misconduct accusations against McDonald on Dec. 13, police spokesman Sgt. Cassandra Davis said in an e-mail. Davis said detectives investigated the incident, but no arrests were made at the time.

The police report states two victims, both of whom are minors, reported the alleged misconduct to school security officers. The victims said McDonald made inappropriate comments to them, according to the police report.

The report states McDonald is accused of calling one of the minors out of the hallway on multiple occasions to ask about her sexual activity. The other victim told school officials that McDonald had approached her at school to comment on how "sexy" she and other girls were, the police report states.

The victims all recounted incidents when they say McDonald hugged them and brushed their backs, according to the report.

McDonald was immediately placed on administrative leave with pay in December, pending investigation into the accusations, the report states.

Prosecutors requested warrants for McDonald's arrest Tuesday, at which point he turned himself in to juvenile detectives, Davis said.

McDonald was issued a citation to appear in Little Rock Criminal Court on April 23, police documents show.

Berryville School Board chooses new math curriculum, accepts Hodge's resignation (Carroll County News)

BERRYVILLE -- School board members voted to spend some \$37,000 on a new math curriculum for Berryville Middle School, accepted the resignation of Berryville Band Director Daniel Hodge, and changed banks, among other things, at a meeting Monday night.

Middle School Principal Shelly Pogue told board members the curriculum purchase was necessary to ensure that instruction in the district conformed to the new Common Core State Frameworks for math, rolled out this year.

The Arkansas Department of Education required every school in the state to adopt a math curriculum by March 15, Pogue wrote in information presented to the board.

"At this point," she said, "the teachers are searching the Internet, borrowing ideas from other schools and states, and spending most of their time searching for materials (and) lesson plans to use with the students to meet the new standards."

Pogue noted the Department of Education had designated her school as "needing improvement" in mathematics for the 2011 to 2012 school year.

"(W)e need a unified curriculum that follows the current Common Core State Standards to help us," she wrote.

The curriculum approved for purchase, the Glencoe Math Arkansas series, was designed specifically to meet the new standards, the principal said. As part of the purchase, each student will receive a two-volume set of textbooks for the next six years, online access for seven years, a CD and worksheets, and an iPad app.

The price also includes free professional development for teachers, she said.

Also Monday, board members voted to contract with Community First Bank for the district's banking needs over the next two years. The contract, effective July 1, includes accounts for the district, activity, and food service funds.

Other banks to submit bids were First National Bank of Berryville, Cornerstone, Arvest, and First National Bank of Green Forest, which currently holds the district contract.

The banks were asked to submit bids in three categories -- for checking account interest rate, money market account interest rate, and 12-month certificate of deposit. Community First outbid the competitors in each category.

Board members also formally accepted Hodge's resignation. The band director had announced his intention to resign last week, after a decade of working in Berryville schools.

Students, parents, and staff have reacted to the news with sadness. Hodge, a well-loved leader in the community, has been credited with helping to grow the band program into a state-wide power-house.

Hodge will leave after this school year to become the band director at Lakeside Junior High School, in Springdale, Ark.

In other business, board members:

* Created a new fourth grade teaching position for the coming school year, to cope with rising student enrollment.

* Approved a fundraising request by the Student Council to hold a student auction late this month or early next month and another by the Quiz Bowl team to sell iced mocha during lunches.

* Accepted the resignations of Intermediate School Counselor Loree Cox, kindergarten teacher Nicole Newberry, and Special Education Paraprofessional Carol Martin.

* Hired Laura Hudgens as the junior high cheer coach for the coming school year.

* Approved the following employee transfers: Collette Cook Tabor and Whitney McMasters from first grade to kindergarten, Anna Newton from ESL to sixth grade literacy, and Rachael Daniel from high school counselor to intermediate school counselor.

* Added the following people to the substitute list for the current school year: Tesa Clark (k-5) and MaryAnn Dignan (k-12, cafeteria, and custodian).

Board members will meet again at 6 p.m. on May 20, in the Intermediate School Cafetorium. For more information, call 870-480-4669.

Pine Bluff School District embarks upon ambitious turnaround plan (Pine Bluff Commercial)

The administration of Pine Bluff School District Superintendent Linda Watson, in cooperation with the PBSB Board of Directors, is in the early stages of implementing an ambitious plan to increase the academic performance of the district's five state-designated priority schools.

Watson hosted a community meeting Tuesday morning at First United Methodist Church to introduce city officials, business leaders, clergy and district educators to representatives of the University of Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program.

"I appreciate the University of Virginia for bringing their school turnaround agenda to us," Watson said. "Our district may be down but we're going to get it done with help from the community. It's not about us. It's about the children."

William Robinson, a deputy director of the university program and a 2000 graduate of Pine Bluff High School, emphasized that 95 schools in eight states have completed at least two years in the program with reading proficiency increasing an average of 36 percent and math proficiency up an average of 46 percent.

"Being named a priority school is actually an opportunity," Robinson said. "The turnaround of low-performing schools is absolutely possible. But it is hard work. It requires bold vision and bold goals. I am very impressed with what I have seen so far from Dr. Watson and her staff. The closing of Greenville Elementary School is the type of bold action that is required for a successful turnaround. It did not have enough students attending to remain financially viable and by closing it the district will be better able to meet the needs of all of its students by using its funds in the smartest way possible."

Bernice Martin-Russell, director of federal and state programs for the district, said that the five priority-designated schools in the PBSB are the second-highest number in the state, behind the Little Rock School District with six.

"Priority schools are among the lowest performing 5 percent of schools in Arkansas," Martin-Russell said. "There are a total of 37 priority schools in the state. The transformation model must be followed by all priority schools. We are trying to make sure that none of our schools go into academic distress."

Transformation

Martin-Russell said that the Arkansas Department of Education has mandated that all priority schools align their turnaround strategy using the transformation model.

"Transformation requires teachers and principals to change to bring about the dramatic change in the learning environment that is needed to benefit the children enrolled in our schools," Martin-Russell said. "Educators who are increasing student outcomes will be identified and rewarded and those who are not doing may be removed."

Robinson said that the U of V program is tailored to bring districts like Pine Bluff out of low-performing status.

"You must have an absolute zealous focus on implementation for a successful turnaround," Robinson said. "It is not about top down or bottom up but instead it is all working together for a successful turnaround. The school principal has got to be an instructional leader down to individual students and teachers."

Robinson said the U of V turnaround program first completes a district readiness assessment to gauge where the strengths and weaknesses are.

"Our philosophy is summarized by three key principles," Robinson said. "A systemic approach that enhances transformational change; the creation of high-impact school leaders through the development of key leadership capabilities; and ongoing support."

Schedule

Robinson said the initial assessment is scheduled for June 5-6 and that discussions will be held with the district afterward to review the results and plan next steps.

Board meeting

The board of directors held their regular monthly meeting Tuesday night in the Pine Bluff High School Little Theater beginning with additional information on plans for improving academic performance.

"We are holding the board meeting here because the turnaround model requires a community meeting," Watson said.

Martin-Russell gave a PowerPoint presentation outlining ADE requirements for priority schools, touching on the points discussed earlier in the day.

Robinson explained the proposed role of the U of V program in the district.

“Turnaround works,” Robinson said. “We have worked with more than 80 schools across the country including Clarke County in Las Vegas, Nev., which saw double digit gains after the first year. We have schools that were performing lower than schools in the Pine Bluff School District that are seeing double-digit gains.”

Crystal Hill parents concerned about death of pet rabbit (North Little Rock Times)

Parents of Crystal Hill elementary school students from both Maumelle and North Little Rock are upset over the mysterious death of a pet rabbit.

According to a North Little Rock police detective’s report, the rabbit had been a pet at the school locked inside a pen that students often played with.

On March 15, Detective Ragan P. Hernandez said she met with school principal Stacy Donaghy, vice-principal Yvonne Harris, two district counselors and a teacher who all told her they’d found the missing rabbit inside the garden with its head missing.

Hernandez said it appeared the rabbit’s ears had been cut off with a sharp object.

All of the school officials gave police the name of a juvenile they suspected because they’d seen blood on his shirt that same day.

The school nurse said the youngster wouldn’t explain how he was hurt and came to have blood on his shirt.

He told the nurse he’d fallen on the playground and had a slight puncture wound in his stomach.

However, the nurse said the wound was inconsistent with the amount of blood seen. Police were given the shirt after school officials confiscated it.

Donaghy said two district counselors went to the boy’s home on March 15 and confronted the youngster who denied having killed the rabbit.

Hernandez said she explained to school officials that the death of a rabbit would be considered a misdemeanor and she said Donaghy told her that Pulaski County Special School District superintendent Jerry Guess said he did not wish to criminally prosecute the student but instead get him counseling.

She said she offered to send the shirt to the state crime lab for testing if the school wanted it done.

Springdale Elementaries Take Top USDA Honors (KNWA)

View video at http://nwahomepage.com/fulltext?nxd_id=422322

A top USDA official celebrated Wednesday the Springdale School District's efforts to go above and beyond to keep kids healthy.

The HealthierUS School Challenge is a voluntary program that recognizes schools for promoting physical activity and nutrition.

Four elementary schools in Springdale received the top level of recognition, the only schools in the state to do it.

"As Americans we are sort of naturally competitive instincts," says Kevin Concannon, the USDA's Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services. "Other school systems will be watching this and noting it."

More than one thousand kids from George, Smith, Hunt and Westwood elementaries gathered at Harber High to celebrate their new "Gold with Distinction" status.

Concannon says fewer than 200 of the nation's 101,000 public schools have earned the honor, and the fact that Springdale now has four gold schools is a tribute to the hard work of P.E. Teachers, lunch ladies and administrators. However, he says the students are the real winners.

"We know they learn better, in terms of if they're have proper nutrition, but they'll grow up healthier as well and they'll be productive adults," he says.

Ark. House approves boost in per-student funding (KNWA, Channel 40/29, Fayetteville/Fort Smith)

LITTLE ROCK —The Arkansas House has approved increasing the per-student funding public schools receive from the state by 2 percent.

The House voted 92-0 Tuesday to approve the bill that would increase the per-student funding amount schools receive from \$6,267 to \$6,393 next school year. The following year, the per-student amount would increase to \$6,521 under the legislation.

The measure would cost the state about \$58 million additionally each year. The proposal now heads to the Senate.

A legislative committee last year recommended that Arkansas increase per-student funding between 1.8 percent and 2.5 percent. The recommendation was part of a report that the Legislature is required by law to issue to define what it costs to provide an adequate education.